

# The Elaine massacre, 1919 - Grif Stockley



A short history of one of the worst incidents of racial violence in American history when hundreds of African-Americans were murdered and tortured by white racists and security forces after black farm workers tried to organise for better pay.

The Elaine Massacre was by far the deadliest racial confrontation in Arkansas history and possibly the bloodiest racial conflict in the history of the United States. While its deepest roots lay in the state's commitment to white supremacy, the events in Elaine (Phillips County) stemmed from tense race relations and growing concerns about labor unions. A shooting incident that occurred at a meeting of the Progressive Farmers and Household Union escalated into mob violence on the part of the white people in Elaine and surrounding areas. Although the exact number is unknown, estimates of the number of African Americans killed by whites range into the hundreds; five white people lost their lives.

The conflict began on the night of September 30, 1919, when approximately 100 African Americans mostly sharecroppers on the plantations of white landowners, attended a meeting of the Progressive Farmers and Household Union of America at a church in Hoop Spur (Phillips County), three miles north of Elaine. The purpose of the meeting, one of several by black sharecroppers in the Elaine area during the previous months, was to obtain better payments for their cotton crops from the white plantation owners who dominated the area during the Jim Crow era. Black sharecroppers were often exploited in their efforts to collect payment for their cotton crops.

In previous months, racial conflict had occurred in numerous cities in America, including Washington DC; Chicago, Illinois; Knoxville, Tennessee; and Indianapolis, Indiana. With labor conflicts escalating throughout the country at the end of World War I, government and business interpreted the demands of labor increasingly as the work of foreign ideologies, such as Bolshevism, that threatened the foundation of the American economy. Thrown into this highly combustible mix was the return to the United States of black soldiers who often exhibited a less submissive attitude within the Jim Crow society around them.



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Unions such as the Progressive Farmers represented a threat not only to the tenet of white supremacy but also to the basic concepts of capitalism. Although the United States was on the winning side of World War I, supporters of American capitalism found in communism a new menace to their security. With the success of the Russian Revolution, stopping the spread of international communism was seen as the duty of all loyal Americans. Arkansas governor Charles Hillman Brough told a St. Louis, Missouri, audience during the war that “there existed no twilight zone in American patriotism” and called Wisconsin senator Robert LaFollete, who opposed the war, a Bolshevik leader.

The threat of “Bolshevism” seemed to be everywhere: not only in the labor strikes led by the radical Industrial Workers of the World but also in the cotton fields of Arkansas.

Leaders of the Hoop Spur union had placed armed guards around the church to prevent disruption of their meeting and intelligence gathering by white opponents. Though accounts of who fired the first shots are in sharp conflict, a shootout in front of the church on the night of September 30, 1919, between the armed black guards around the church and three individuals whose vehicle was parked in front of the church resulted in the death of W. A. Adkins, a white security officer for the Missouri-Pacific Railroad, and the wounding of Charles Pratt, Phillips County’s white deputy sheriff.

The next morning, the Phillips County sheriff sent out a posse to arrest those

suspected of being involved in the shooting. Although the posse encountered minimal resistance from the black residents of the area around Elaine, the fear of African Americans, who outnumbered whites in this area of Phillips County by a ratio of ten to one, led an estimated 500 to 1,000 armed white people—mostly from the surrounding Arkansas counties but also from across the river in Mississippi—to travel to Elaine to put down what was characterized by them as an “insurrection.” On October 1, Phillips County authorities sent three telegrams to Gov. Brough, requesting that U.S. troops be sent to Elaine.

Brough responded by gaining permission from the Department of War to send more than 500 battle-tested troops from Camp Pike, outside of Little Rock (Pulaski County).

After troops arrived in Elaine on the morning of October 2, 1919, the white mobs began to depart the area and return to their homes. The military placed several hundred African Americans in makeshift stockades until they could be questioned and vouched for by their white employers.

Evidence shows that the mobs of whites slaughtered African Americans in and around Elaine. For example, H. F. Smiddy, one of the white witnesses to the massacre, swore in an eye-witness account in 1921 that “several hundred of them... began to hunt negroes and shooting [sic] them as they came to them.” Anecdotal evidence also suggests that the troops from Camp Pike engaged in indiscriminate killing of African Americans in the area, which, if true, was a replication of past militia activity to put down perceived black revolts. In 1925, Sharpe Dunaway, an employee of the Arkansas Gazette, alleged that soldiers in Elaine had “committed one murder after another with al the calm deliberation in the world, either too heartless to realize the enormity of their crimes, or too drunk on moonshine to give a continental darn.”

Colonel Isaac Jenks, commander of the U.S. troops at Elaine, recorded the number of African Americans killed by U.S. troops as only two. In contrast, the correspondent for the Memphis Press on October 2, 1919, wrote, “Many Negroes are reported killed by the soldiers....” Other anecdotal information suggests that U.S. troops also engaged in torture of African Americans to make them confess and give information.

The white power structure in Phillips County formed a “Committee of Seven,” made of influential planters, businessmen, and elected officials, to investigate the

cause of the disturbances. The committee met with Gov. Brough, who had ridden on the train with the troops and accompanied them on a march to the Hoop Spur area. The governor, who was reported as saying he was going to Elaine

to “obtain correct information,” accepted the authority of the committee in return for its commitment that no lynchings would take place in Helena (Phillips County). He returned to Little Rock the next day and told a press conference, “The situation at Elaine has been wel handled and is absolutely under control. There is no danger of any lynching.... The white citizens of the county deserve unstinting praise for their actions in preventing mob violence.”

From this point forward, two versions of what occurred at Elaine exist. The white leaders put forward their view that black residents had been about to revolt. E. M. Allen, a planter and real estate developer who became the spokesman for Phillips County's white power structure, told the Helena World on October 7, “The present trouble with the Negroes in Phillips County is not a race riot. It is a deliberately planned insurrection of the Negroes against the whites directed by an organization known as the ‘Progressive Farmers and Household Union of America,’ established for the purpose of banding Negroes together for the kil ing of white people.”

On the other hand, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in New York, which had sent Field Secretary Walter White to investigate the events in Elaine, contested such allegations from the outset. White wrote in the Chicago Daily News on October 19, 1919, that the belief there had been an insurrection was “only a figment of the imagination of Arkansas whites and not based on fact.” He said, “White men in Helena told me that more than one hundred Negroes were kil ed.”

Within days of the initial shoot-out, 285 African Americans were taken from the temporary stockades to the jail in Helena, the county seat, although the jail had space for only forty-eight. Two white members of the Phillips County posse, T. K. Jones and H. F. Smiddy, stated in sworn affidavits in 1921 that they committed acts of torture at the Phillips County jail and named others who had also participated in the torture. On October 31, 1919, the Phillips County grand jury charged 122 African Americans with crimes stemming from the racial disturbances. The charges ranged from murder to nightriding, a charge akin to terroristic threatening. The trials began the next week. White attorneys from Helena were appointed by Circuit Judge J. M. Jackson to represent the first

twelve black men to go to trial. Attorney Jacob Fink, who was appointed to represent Frank Hicks, admitted to the jury that he had not interviewed any witnesses. He made no motion for a change of venue, nor did he challenge a single prospective juror, taking the first twelve called. By November 5, 1919, the first twelve black men given trials had been convicted of murder and sentenced to die in the electric chair.

As a result, sixty-five others quickly entered plea-bargains and accepted sentences of up to twenty-one years for second-degree murder. Others had their charges dismissed or ultimately were not prosecuted.

In Little Rock and at the headquarters of the NAACP in New York, efforts began to fight the death sentences handed down in Helena, led in part by Scipio Africanus Jones, the leading black attorney of his era in Arkansas. Jones began to raise money in the black community in Little Rock for the defense of the “Elaine Twelve,” as the convicted men came to be known.

At the same time, the New York offices of the NAACP, upon the advice of Arkansas attorney U. S.

Bratton, hired the Little Rock law firm of George C. Murphy, a former attorney general and candidate for governor, as counsel for the twelve men. Even at the age of seventy-nine, Murphy, a former Confederate officer and Arkansas attorney general, was considered one of the best trial attorneys in Arkansas. By late November, Jones was working with Murphy’s firm to save the Elaine Twelve.

Their initial task was to appeal the sentences given to the Elaine Twelve and ask for a new trial based on errors committed by the trial court. Gov. Brough issued a stay of the executions to permit an appeal to the Arkansas Supreme Court after the motions were denied. For the next five years, the

cases of the Elaine Twelve were mired in litigation as Murphy and Jones fought to save the men from death. They secured new trials for six of the men, known as the Ware defendants, based on the fact that the trial judge had not required jurors to indicate the degree of murder on their ballot forms. The convictions of the other six men, known as the Moore defendants, were affirmed.

The cases of the Elaine Twelve were litigated on two separate tracks. The re-trials of the Ware defendants began on May 3, 1920. During the trials, Murphy

became ill, and Jones became the principal counsel. Hostility toward him was so great from local white residents that, out of fear for his life, he was said to sleep at a different black family's house every night during the trials. The convictions were again affirmed. Gov. Brough once again stayed their executions until the Arkansas Supreme Court could again review the cases. Ultimately, the Ware defendants were freed by the Arkansas Supreme Court after two terms of court had passed, and the state of Arkansas made no move to re-try the men.

The Moore defendants were granted a new hearing after the U.S. Supreme Court, in the case of *Moore v. Dempsey*, ruled that the original proceedings in Helena had been a "mask," and that the state of Arkansas had not provided "a corrective process" that would have allowed the defendants to vindicate their constitutional right to due process of law on appeal.

Instead of pursuing a new hearing in federal court, in March 1923, Scipio Jones entered into negotiations to have the Moore defendants released. To be released, the men would have to plead guilty to second-degree murder and a sentence of five years from the date they were first incarcerated in the Arkansas State Penitentiary. Finally, on January 14, 1925, Governor Thomas McRae ordered the release of the Moore defendants by granting them indefinite furloughs after they had pleaded guilty to second-degree murder. In the interim, Jones had secured the release of the other Elaine defendants.

Though some local white residents of Phillips County still contend that white people at the time acted appropriately to prevent a slaughter in the Elaine area in 1919, the modern view of most historians of this crisis is that white mobs unjustifiably killed an undetermined number of African Americans. More controversial is the view that the military participated in the murder of blacks. Race relations in this area of Arkansas are currently quite strained for a number of reasons, including the events of 1919. A conference on the matter in Helena in 2000 resulted in no closure for the people in Phillips County.

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